

Five Secrets to Success for a New Wing Comptroller ...A Freshman's Perspective

Major David R. Zorzi

*...the only time Success
comes before hard Work
is in the dictionary.*

—Vince Lombardi

About the time of the publishing of this article, the summer assignment cycle will be placing 35 of my fellow financial management brethren in comptroller squadron and flight commander positions across our great Air Force. I know you've heard it before, but let me assure you, it truly is the best assignment you'll have in your career. Working directly for the wing commander, you'll be making major fiscal and resource decisions, actually seeing and touching the fruits of your efforts, and leading people. There's nothing like it!

Last year at this time I took command of my first comptroller squadron. The next seven months were a blur as we postured for fiscal year closeout, readied and rebuilt continuity programs for our Unit Compliance Inspection (UCI) in October, and endured three Operational Readiness Exercises in preparation for our Phase I Operational Readiness Inspection (ORI) in January. Well, we did it and we did it very successfully. Lucky, no; great wing leadership, of course; but, without doubt the quintessential element was the extremely talented people who surround me here in the 4th Comptroller Squadron that ensured our success. Vince Lombardi's been quoted as saying, "the only time **success** comes before hard **work** is in the dictionary". And, he's right...the proud professionals of the squadron worked smart, worked hard, and that yielded them a 100% compliance on their UCI, an *Excellent* in the ORI, and of course, a 99.99% year-end execution rate.

Many of you will be faced with similar and even greater challenges upon taking command of your unit. Let me share some "sage" advice from a *freshman comptroller* which, if you act upon, will pay you big dividends as you embark on arguably your most rewarding and gratifying assignment.

Identify Key Responsibilities

Immediately after you take command, get a hold of the unit's additional duty list and bring together your support staff to determine your *specific* responsibilities as the comptroller, you may be surprised. You are the wing audit program manager, the bank and credit union liaison officer, an advisor to the financial management board, a voting member of nonappropriated fund council, a key wing Battlestaff member (get your restricted area badge now), you're on the disaster control group, and you need to personally honcho the

comptroller quarterly cash verification process...to name a few. For those of you who are squadron commanders the list goes on and on. Again, clearly identify your responsibilities in all the fore mentioned roles and understand your part in the process. Next find out when and where you're expected to be throughout the wing; your bosses weekly staff meeting is a great place to start. Suffice it to say you've got a lot on your plate and this is just day one on the job. By now you're starting to get a good feel for how great the position is, but wait there's much more. In addition you need to in-process, attend a myriad of meetings, and learn everyone's first and last name in the unit. Now, you're just scratching the surface to what will make you an effective leader, comptroller, and squadron commander.

Full Wing Immersion

The absolute most beneficial action you can undertake to gain as much knowledge as rapidly as possible, is to immerse yourself in the wing. Believe me, you can read the wing mission brief 10 times where you can glean much about the mission and roles of your wing, but until you physically get down in the trenches with your new comrades, you'll never fully understand how it operates nor will you be an integral part of it. So, take charge and become an information sponge. By far, taking the proactive measure of meeting with every group commander, squadron commander, and wing agencies chief starting in your second or third week on the job will set the tone for your tenure. Ask your support staff to call each commander and agency chief and setup a 30 to 45 minute courtesy call with each unit. Don't assume your fellow squadron commanders know what your "finance unit" does for the wing, and remember to dummy down the FM-speak. When meeting with each individual, don't bring their unit's government travel card delinquency rates, the TQ79 report, or their obligation rates. Instead, ask about their mission, how many people are in their squadron, how long have they been in command; ask about their challenges, upcoming deployments, and the like. The sooner you get your arms around each group, squadron, and agency mission the faster you will become an effective wing comptroller, not just another bean counter. Lastly, do tell them what you bring to the fight with regard to your role in assisting them throughout a GAO or Air Force audit, explain what your financial services and financial analysis flights bring to the table; and while you're there ask their perception of your organization's customer services reputation. This honest feedback will help you set the future course for your unit.

On-Going Squadron Immersion

General George S. Patton, Jr. said, "Trying to lead men from behind makes you a driver not a leader. A leader must get up front [front lines of battlefield] at least once a day. A leader must be ahead of his men. You've got to know what is going on all the time." Now our business isn't quite as provocative as the battlefield but nonetheless as comptrollers/commanders we still need to lead from the front. You've got to walk around the frontlines and back shops of your organization daily to know what's really going on. And, I submit you should even go a step further. I wholeheartedly recommend that soon after you complete your wing immersion you begin an ongoing squadron immersion. Once a week for two or three hours sit side-by-side with one of your talented members and find out what exactly they do for a living. Rotate from flight-to-flight and section-to-section sitting with different people each time and learn what they bring to the organization. Trust me you will never truly understand the GOO (government orders outstanding) or the civilian pay program until you've sat with one of your best and brightest and walked in her/his footsteps for a few hours. It will give you a heightened appreciation for them, increase your knowledge base, reemphasize that you're surrounded with smarter people than yourself, and ultimately make you a better comptroller. Continue this process until you've made it throughout the entire unit—it will probably take two years.

Visible Leadership

Visible leadership is more than management by walking around; it is being part of everything that happens at your base. Your presence at promotions, retirements, change of commands, airman leadership school graduations, community military affairs meetings, and building grand openings is not optional; it is required of a visible leader. Remember you are the "wing" comptroller, the chief financial officer and chief resource advisor to the wing commander and the senior staff. In order to best understand the complexities and integration of the wing's workings you must attend and be a part of these events, not just be cognizant that they've occurred. It will garner you a perspective that cannot be gained

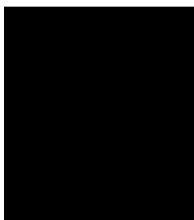
any other way. So, tear yourself away from the emails and EPR's, they'll still be there when you get back and anyway that's why there's 24 hours in a day. Visibility goes hand in hand with approachability. While at wing functions and community events you will be among the group and squadron commanders, your customers—be approachable. Often you can accomplish more meaningful work before, during, and after these informal, none threatening, functions than you can with many a meeting and dozens of email volleys.

Take Care of Your People

You'll notice that in the first key to success I specifically said *identify* your key responsibilities and *understand* your role in the process—not learn, study, or memorize them. You won't have time nor will you need to study fiscal law, comb the 65 series AFIs, or rehearse the Joint Travel Regulations...there's a very good reason for that. It's simple—you **take care of your people and they will take care of the mission!** The professionals in your unit that work the details every day are the experts, not you. Trust them and they will perform and perform. That SrA who's worked in Customer Services knows more about their section and has computed more vouchers in a week than you'll have filed or seen in your 14-year career. Should a tough question arise, they'll either know the answer or can quickly get it for you through their resource and people networks—they won't let you fail. You've heard it said, people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Listen to your people, squint with your ears not your eyes when they speak. Your people are looking to you to *set a course for the unit, to layout a vision, and set the tone*. Once you've done that, give them the respect they've earned, a meaningful recognition program to show your appreciation, a professional workspace to accomplish the mission; continually upgrade their tools so they can run at peak performance, and award some down time when they've gone above and beyond...if you do all this I assure you "yours will be the world and everything that's in it" for *at least* the next two years!



About the Author



Major David R. Zorzi is the Commander, 4th Comptroller Squadron, Seymour Johnson AFB NC. He received his Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration with a minor in Economics from King's College in 1986 and his MBA from Wilkes University in 1987, both located in Wilkes-Barre PA. He also received a Master of Science in Military Operational Art and Science from Air University, Maxwell AFB AL, in 2000. He has held various comptroller positions at MAJCOM, NAF, and wing-level and has served as a Services Squadron commander. Major Zorzi is a career-long member of the American Society of Military Comptrollers.

